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ABSTRACT

This document presents the results of one item that was included on two surveys of the California State Colleges professors that were designed to elicit attitudes concerning occupational satisfaction. The item in question stated that college teaching is so bad that most professors ought to be sued for malpractice. In answer to the item, 7% of the respondents to the 1968 survey stated that they strongly agreed that most college teaching was bad. Another 40% moderately agreed, 6% indicated they had no opinion on the item, 23% moderately disagreed, and 25% strongly disagreed. In the 1970 survey, 8% of the respondents stated strong agreement with the negative judgments of college teaching; 33% indicated moderate agreement; 35% moderate disagreement; and 24% strong disagreement. It was evident upon examination of the data that faculty under forty are more likely to be unhappy with the present state of college teaching than faculty fifty or older, but rank and field of the professors seem to reveal no basis for comparison. (HS)

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Is College Teaching So Bad That Most Professors Ought To Be Sued for Malpractice ?

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The title of this paper originally appeared as a statement cited in the San Francisco Chronicle. About four years ago the Chronicle carried an article reporting on an educational conference held in the city. In the account of the conference one speaker was quoted as having said that in his opinion the quality of teaching at most colleges and universities was so bad that the majority of professors ought to be sued for malpractice.

The statement was an intriguing one, and in the course of designing a survey of faculty in 1968 I changed it into a question and included it on the questionnaire. When the responses to the item was examined later they proved interesting and suggestive. Thus in 1970 when another survey was being prepared I again included the question among those to be posed to the sample.

Some of the survey data relating to the question will be presented later in the paper. Before turning to it, though, it is useful to look at the question more carefully in terms of the assumptions inherent in it, the implications suggested by it, and the use to which it was put in the surveys.

If one considers the question aside from its shock or humorous impact one quickly sees that it has grown out of several fundamental assumptions about higher education and the role of the college level instructor. Specifically, the question assumes:

1. That college level teaching ought to be "good" by some kind of standard.

2. That college teaching, per se, is not just an activity but a profession and as such performance by those within it should be subject to some standard which in turn ought to be enforced but is not.

3. That college faculty are, or should be, legally responsible for the caliber of their teaching performance.

4. That substantial amounts of instruction at the university and college levels is substandard; to the point that an informed observer of higher education felt compelled to call it to the attention of his colleagues and the public in an open forum.

5. That the issue of enforcing standards in teaching, professionally or legally, is an open one in that it is not being handled by members of the occupation nor by the legal agencies of the society.

Possibly there are other assumptions that one could read into the question. Those listed have been regarded as the major ones for purposes of this presentation.

The professionalism of college teaching is an old matter. For several centuries professors have been viewed as professionals along with members of the other traditional professions - law, medicine, and the clergy. Unlike these other occupations, however, college teaching is not in and of itself an occupation in the normal sense of the term. It is composed of persons trained in and commited to a broad range of distinct academic fields, each of which has its own status, goals, and orientations. Yet, there is the expectation that those people who perform instructional functions in universities and colleges have a sufficiently strong common bond to appropriately consider them as a separate occupation with professional status. In the past when professors were trained more generally and had wide interests this expectation of a common bond was probably quite reasonable. At present with training taking a more technical and specialized direction the commonalities among faculty members are less clear.

Some years ago in a study now seen as a minor classic, Alvin Gouldner found that professors were subject to forces pulling them in two quite different directions. One of the forces emanated from the institution with its emphasis upon teaching and loyalty to the school, while the other came from the academic discipline and stressed research and a cosmopolitan set of loyalties. In this context some faculty saw themselves as teachers, who happened also to be historians, chemists, or engineers; in contrast, other faculty viewed themselves as historians, chemists, or engineers who

happen to be teaching.

In addition to this difference in orientation among college teachers there is also the fact that unlike other professions college teachers are not trained to be college teachers, nor are there established common criteria for access to the occupa tion. It is true that graduate faculty do the training of those who will become instructors at the university or college level. The point is that the programs they operate prepare the person for access to the particular discipline. The student's performance is assessed against discipline standards and criteria and his performance on those together with his potential for the discipline determine success or failure in achieving advanced degrees. Rarely do graduate programs offer preparation for teaching and even where they do it is unlikely that granting degrees is determined by performance or potential as a teacher. Thus, tne potential college professor spends years learning to be a biologist or economist, not an instructor. In many cases, however, he does secure some teaching experience as a "T.A." but this is often incidental to his overall program of training. In other cases, the new professor learns to teach on-the-job - usually without any definable guidance or supervision.

Given these problems of preparation and orientation which characterize college teaching it is not too surprising that the occupation has no accepted common standard of what constitutes quality teaching. Further, so long as these, and other, divisions are significant within the occupation it is not likely that such a standard will be established.

As the question implies, though, there is much discontent over the nature of teaching in the contemporary university and college. Students, employers, parents, politicians, and others have all levelled criticisms at professors. The criticisms have, it is true, varied markedly, to the

point that many of them are contradictory. Students, for example, charge that most college teaching is done in a style long out-moded and is concerned with material they feel is irrelevant. Parents and potential employers also are unhappy with college teaching and they too frequently state that it is irrelevant, but when they say this they mean something quite different from that intended by the students. Politicians have joined the fray, but their concerns are normally with another range of issues altogether.

There is not the time here to explore in any detail the varied types of criticisms being made of college teaching nor is there the time to try to weigh the relative merits of the charges that have been levelled. It is enough to say that there is a high degree of dissatisfaction with instruction, and that a growing amount of this unhappiness is increasingly coming from the instructors themselves.

One of the other assumptions in the title question is that in the absence of internal controls over the quality of teaching the society itself ought to enforce teaching standards - through the mechanism of the courts and malpractice suits. This is a fascinating idea but again one surrounded with innumerable problems. A paper dealing with this very point was delivered only last month in San Francisco by Dr. Richard Sparks of Fresno State College. Dr. Sparks was concerned with teaching in general and concluded that the education profession is not well suited to the concept of malpractice. In his analysis Dr. Sparks argued that the lack of internal agreement on standards was shared by the society itself. Thus in the presence of no professional or societal consensus as to what constitutes good or bad teaching the notion of malpractice cannot apply.

What seems to be left is something resembling personal, "gut level"

assessments of teaching quality. These judgements are often drawn from years of experience, and probably are correct more frequently than they are wrong. Still, in the absence of clear, defined standards even seasoned senior faculty sometimes feel uneasy and unsure as they judge the performance of their younger colleagues. In a context such as this an examination of the views of faculty as to the overall state of teaching quality becomes an interesting object of study.

In the surveys mentioned earlier the question about the quality of college teaching was included partly out of curiosity and partly as a possible measure of general satisfaction or dissatisfaction on the part of the teachers. In analysis the item was basically used along with others to tap occupational satisfaction and not examined in and of itself. Still, an attempt was made to find any general relationships between responses on the question and a series of other variables. It is from this pool of data that the tables attached to the paper were drawn.

Both of the surveys were done in the California State Colleges and in each case the samples drawn included cross sections of the faculty. The 1968 study was limited to a survey of four northern California state colleges, while the 1970 work covered all 18 functioning state colleges. In the earlier study a sample of 1,106 faculty was chosen, of whom 497 replied with useable questionnaires (a response of approximately 45 percent). A total of 1,500 faculty were survey in the 1970 study and in that instance useable replies were received from 835 persons (about 56 percent).

In answer to the question on the quality of college teaching 7 percent of the respondents to the 1968 survey stated that they strongly agreed that most college teaching was bad. Another 40 percent moderately

agreed, 6 percent indicated they had no opinion on the item, 23 percent moderately disagreed, and 25 percent strongly disagreed. Combining the categories the study revealed that 47 percent of the respondents agreed, 6 percent had no opinion, and 48 percent disagreed.

In the 1970 survey 8 percent of the respondents stated strong agreement with the negative judgment of college teaching; 33 percent indicated moderate agreement; 35 percent moderate disagreement; and 24 percent strong disagreement. By combining responses the data showed 41 percent of the professors agreeing and 59 percent disagreeing. (An allied survey of college administrators also done in 1970 revealed that 31 percent of that group agreed and 69 percent disagreed).

Although the percentages changed somewhat between the two time periods it is clear that a substantial number of college faculty are distressed over the present state of college teaching. The next question then is who are the professors with this negative perspective and how can the viewpoint be accounted for. Table 1 provides data from the surveys on the proportion of people agreeing and disagreeing by age, rank, and area of academic discipline.

It is evident from the first part of Table 1 that faculty under forty are more likely to be unhappy with the present state of college teaching than faculty fifty or older. This is consistent with what one might expect for a variety of reasons. Younger persons in our society generally have demonstrated time and again unhappiness with established practices and it is not surprising that this also appears within college faculties. It does show, though, the presence of a professorial generation gap, at least with respect to expectations and valuations surrounding teaching.

Interestingly, the difference that appears when age is considered does

not carry over significantly when the focus is upon academic rank. The Assistant Professors do seem a little more prone to agree with the item, but the degree of difference between then and the senior faculty is too slight to emphasize.

With a few expections the area of academic discipline also does not stand out when responses on the item are examined. Faculty in the "other professional" category demonstrated on both surveys a more favorable estimation of the quality of college teaching, and to a lesser extent a similar pattern seems to appear among professors in the natural sciences. In the other cases, though, the pattern is more mixed, but it suggests that teachers in the humanities, social sciences, business, education, and the "other, liberal arts" groupings are a bit more prone to agree with the statement.

Thus, with the expectiion of age the three variables looked at to this point yielded only small of particular relationships to the way faculty view college teaching. In light of this a range of other items were examined which dealt with the attitudes of the respondents toward various aspects of higher education, academic governance, and allied issues. The data on these questions is presented in the series of tables following Table 1.

Without exploring in great detail the nature of the patterns on every one of these items a few generalizations can be made which have been drawn from the overall character of the data. It appears that a negative perspective on the contemporary quality of college teaching is part of a broader syndrome of discontent with numerous facets of higher education. Persons who are unhappy with the role of faculty in governance, either in a general way or in terms of the effectiveness of their representative in-

stitutions (faculty senates) also are more likely to take a dim view of the quality of college teaching. Similarly, persons who feel that higher education has become depersonalized, persons who are not pleased with the nature of personal relations within their departments, and people who feel that most faculty do not really care very much about their students all demonstrate higher than average agreement with the question.

Validations of this discontent appear in the differences on the items dealing with satisfaction with career choice, intent to leave the present college, and intent to remain in teaching. That is, on all of these items a higher percentage of those unhappy also express concomitant distress over the quality of teaching.

In another vein this syndrome of dissatisfaction does not appear to be unrelated to more specific variables. It seems, for example, that professors in larger departments are more likely to hold a dim view of college teaching, and it further appears that those who are unhappy also hold a somewhat different perspective as to the purpose of a higher education.

Political orientation also is related to the views of faculty on college teaching. Persons who regard themselves as radical are markedly more dissatisfied than those with other political perspectives, and it is interesting that the differences between liberals, moderates, and conservatives are really rather small.

If we stand back from the data and consider it in relation to the assumptions and implications of the title question it becomes possible to propose a few concluding points. Aside from the particular relationships which are presented in the tables it is evident that a surprisingly high proportion of college teachers are dissatisfied with the current caliber of teaching in higher education. While the level of this unhappiness is

higher among the younger faculty, among professors in large departments, and among teachers with certain kinds of orientations, it is instructive that in virtually all of the comparisons about one-third of the respondents at a minimum agree on the question. Thus, the unhappiness with modern college teaching is actually rather widespread.

It is not clear from the data whether distress over the quality of teaching is the source of dissatisfaction on the other items, whether it is a product of other irritations, or whether these negative perspectives constitutte a syndrome which is created by the play of still other factors. I am inclined to think that the syndrome concept is probably the most applicable. That is, the data suggests to me that there is a general complex of dissatisfaction among some professors which is generated from their educational, social, and political views as these encounter different orientations which currently are more dominant in higher education.

Since there is a greater inclination toward this critical viewpoint of teaching on the part of younger faculty it will be interesting to observe over time if their perspective eventually becomes dominant and thereprevails in teaching. If so, in years to come it might be the older faculty who would react negatively to the character of college teaching.

In any case the presence of such dissatisfaction is not so deep or common within faculties as to produce the professional types of controls assumed in the question itself. Not only would there be problems in arriving at agreed upon standards, most faculty at the moment might not feel they are necessary. In this type of situation, as Professor Sparks suggested last month, the way does become open for society to address the problem by instituting its standards upon teaching and its mechanisms for enforcing them. In short, college faculty would do well to recognize

the presence of a significant degree of dissatisfaction wuth the quality of teaching within its own ranks and to further take steps in facing the issues surrounding this question. Should professors not do they they not only subvert their claim to professional standing they vistually abdictate it. As the data implies it would be easy to write-off internal criticisms as the work of young, radical faculty who seem to be unhappy with everything anyway. To do so would ignore the existence of similar distress within a significant minority of teachers who are not young, radical or negative on most other kinds of questions. Were such a course of action followed it could become increasingly possible that within the near future faculty might be subject to malpractice suits if their teaching performance was poor.

TABLE 1

Age, Rank, and Academic Discipline,
by Agreement or Disagreement That College Teaching
Is So Bad That Most Professors Ought To Be Sued For Malpractice

(Percent)

Rank (1968 data)	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Total	N
Professor	47	5	48	100	185
Associate Professor	44	7	49	100	131
Assistant Professor	49	7	44	100	153

Age (1970 data)	Agree	Disagree	Total	N
Under 30	44	56	100	100
30 - 39	45	55	100	249
40 - 49	40	60	100	260
50 - 59	37	63	100	129
60 or older	32	68	100	50

Academic Discipline (1968 and 1970 data)	1968 Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Total	N
Humanities	54	6	40	100	101
Social Sciences	49	10	42	101	125
Natural Sciences	46	2	52	100	88
Engineering	50	7	43	100	14
Education	45	6	49	100	51
Business	47	6	47	100	34
Other:Professional	36	4	60	100	73

	1970 Agree	Disagree		
Humanities	39	61	100	141
Social Sciences	39	61	100	175
Natural Sciences	35	65	100	122
Other:Liberal Arts	52	48	100	27
Engineering	38	62	100	42
Education	52	48	100	67
Business	47	53	100	49
Other:Professional	36	64	100	132

TABLE 2

Attitudes on Educational Issues by Perspective on College Teaching

(Percent)

Main Purpose of Higher Education is: (1968 data)	College Teaching Is Bad			
	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	N
To prepare students for a vocation	35	12	53	52
To provide a basic general education	48	6	46	298
To help students develop ethics, moral standards and values.	69	0	31	35
To prepare students to deal with community and social problems	33	4	63	24
To provide knowledge and facts	47	3	50	30
Main Interest Is In: (1968 data)				
Teaching	54	5	41	393
Research	46	8	46	95
Proportion of Professors Really Interested in Their Students (1968 data)				
All or a high percentage	43	6	51	331
One half or less	70	6	24	117
Higher Education is Depersonalized (1968 data)				
Agree	53	7	40	289
Disagree	38	5	57	200

TABLE 3

Attitudes on Professional Items by Perspective on College Teaching

(Percent)

	College Teaching Is Bad		
Satisfaction With Faculty Participation in College Decision-Making (1970 data)	Agree	Disagree	N
Satisfied	32	68	464
Dissatisfied	52	48	305
Is Local Faculty Senate Effective In Representing Faculty Opinion (1970 data)			
Effective	36	64	548
Ineffective	52	48	211
Is Local Faculty Senate Effective In Influencing Policy (1970 data)			
Effective	35	65	512
Ineffective	50	50	243

How Would You Describe Personal Relations Within Your Department (1968 data)	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	N
Good	42	6	52	337
Fair or Poor	54	6	40	157
Do You Expect to Remain in College Teaching As a Career (1968 data)				
Yes	45	6	49	447
No	63	7	30	30
Do You Plan To Remain At Your Present College For the Forseeable Future (1968 data)				
Yes	39	7	54	310
No	56	4	40	151

Position on Collective Bargaining For College Faculty (1970 data)	Agree	Disagree	N
Favor Collective Bargaining	44	56	494
Uncertain	34	66	143
Oppose Collective Bargaining	39	61	164

TABLE 4

Miscellaneous Items by Perspective on College Teaching

(Percent)

	College Teaching Is Bad			
Number of Full-Time Faculty In Department (1968 data)	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	N
1 - 10	47	5	48	125
11 - 20	47	7	46	182
21 - 30	42	8	50	101
31 or more	58	5	37	59
Year of Appointment at Present College (1968 data)				
1960 - 1968	48	6	46	303
1950 - 1959	46	6	48	145
1949 or earlier	38	3	58	38

Political Ideology (1970 data)	Agree	Disagree	N
Conservative	37	63	76
Moderate	38	62	299
Liberal	40	60	369
Radical	71	29	49